War Scare

The real-life war game that almost led to nuclear armageddon.

BY NATE JONES | MAY 21, 2013

According to a declassified National Security Agency history, *American Cryptology During the Cold War*, the "period 1982-1984 marked the most dangerous Soviet-American confrontation since the Cuban Missile Crisis." The secret history recounts that "Cold War hysteria reached its peak" in the autumn of 1983 with a NATO nuclear-release exercise named Able Archer 83, which — according to a CIA Special National Intelligence Estimate — caused "Soviet air units in Germany and Poland [to assume] high alert status with readying of nuclear strike forces."

Despite the ramifications of this possible nuclear miscalculation, the history of the Able Archer 83 war scare has remained largely unavailable to the public. This dearth of primary sources has even led critics — with some justification — to describe the study of the war scare as "an echo chamber of inadequate research and misguided analysis" and "circle reference dependency," with an overreliance upon "the same scanty evidence."

In an attempt to fill this "echo chamber," the National Security Archive has begun posting, in three parts, the largest collection of documents about the incident available on the web. These documents come from Freedom of Information Act releases by the CIA, the National Security Agency, the Department of Defense, and the Department of State, research findings from American archives, as well as formerly classified Soviet Politburo and KGB files, interviews with ex-Soviet generals, and records from other former communist states.

Today's posting includes an especially revealing document: The Air Force Seventh Air Division's After Action Report for Able Archer 83. This after-action report is the first official document to describe in detail "the transition from purely conventional operations to chemical, nuclear, and conventional operations" during Able Archer 83. In fact, it reveals that the secondary and tertiary sources that modern accounts of Able Archer 83 are based upon do not even report the correct dates (November 7-11, 1983) of the exercise.

The after-action report includes other revealing details about Able Archer 83 which suggest that the exercise included components that were more provocative than in previous exercises. These changes may have been misread by fearful Soviet intelligence organs, preoccupied with the "decapitating" Pershing II missiles soon to be installed in Europe, and tasked by General Secretary Yuri Andropov to carry out the largest peacetime intelligence operation in history: Operation RYaN. It was a search for *Raketno-Yadernoye Napadenie,* the KGB code name for a feared Western nuclear first strike.

These potential indicators included: a 170-flight, radio-silent airlift of 19,000 U.S. soldiers to Europe (this occurred during the much larger conventional precursor exercise to Able Archer 83, Autumn Forge 83), the shifting of NATO commands from "Permanent War Headquarters to the Alternate War Headquarters," the practice of "new nuclear weapons release procedures," including consultations with cells in Washington and London, and the "sensitive, political issue" of numerous "slips of the tongue" in which B-52 sorties were referred to as nuclear "strikes."

According to NATO's script for how the Cold War could turn hot, the conflict between superpowers began with the backdrop of a "change of leadership" within the Soviet Union in February of 1983, "growing unrest in Eastern Europe," and, eventually, a Warsaw Pact (termed "Orange Pact" in the exercise) invasion of Yugoslavia, after it requested economic and military assistance from the West.

Then, on November 3, Orange crossed the Finnish border, invaded Norway the next day, and pressed on into West Germany ("Orange Forces were attacking along the entire German border with air attacks") and then the United Kingdom ("OR attacks on UK airfields disrupted B-52 and KC-135 operations as well as destroying some aircraft").

Because it could not stop the Soviets's conventional advance, Blue (NATO) "request[ed] initial limited use of nuclear weapons against pre-selected fixed targets" on the morning of November 8. But because "Blue's use of nuclear weapons did not stop Orange's aggression," the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) "requested follow-on use of nuclear weapons late on 9 November. This request was approved in the afternoon of 10 November and follow-on use of nuclear weapons was executed on the morning of 11 November." Then, the exercise ended; there was nothing left to destroy.

The newly released Able Archer 83 after-action report does provide some irony. At the very moment NATO was practicing a long, drawn-out scenario of a gradual shift from conventional to nuclear war, some within the Soviet Union were readying their nuclear forces in preparation for a possible Western decapitating first strike. There really was a danger of nuclear war "through miscalculation"

Exercise Able Archer 83 After Action Report 1 December 1983 by JDStuster

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When America Became a Cyberwarrior

A secret document shows the NSA has been planning attacks since the Clinton years.

BY JEFFREY T. RICHELSON, MALCOLM BYRNE │ APRIL 26, 2013

At a time when Chinese malware is targeting America's computer infrastructure and U.S.-Israeli worms (e.g., Stuxnet) have reportedly attacked Iranian centrifuges, a recently declassified item from the National Security Agency (NSA) offers a little history on how at least one part of the U.S. government foresaw its role in the growing field of "Information Warfare."

This short item from a classified NSA publication reveals that as far back as 1997 the super-secret agency was tasked with finding ways not just to listen in on our enemies (the NSA's usual stock-in-trade), but actually to attack hostile computer networks. The document proclaimed that "the future of warfare is warfare in cyberspace," and it sketched out how tomorrow's "Information Warriors" would think, act, and fight on the new digital battlefield.

The NSA's involvement in cybersecurity is an outgrowth of its longtime role in ensuring communications and information security for various components of the government and private sector, in addition to its need to guarantee the security of the computers it has relied on heavily for decades. Its role in computer-network exploitation — of gathering electronic "data at rest" — is a natural extension of its decades-old role of gathering "data in motion" via signals intelligence.

According to the document's author, a former special assistant to the NSA's director, the new activities — not just "exploitation" and "protection," but "attack" — were "sure to be a catalyst for major change" at the agency. But, he pointed out to his colleagues, there should be no doubt that a new age of warcraft was dawning, brought about in no small part by changing mores in American society. Because of the information age, he wrote, "physical combat can be viewed in living rooms of America via television," and as a result, "[t]he horrors of war cannot be hidden." Therefore, "in the simplest of terms, 'body bags' are no longer acceptable," and there is "considerable societal pressure to find non-lethal means of accomplishing tasks that once called for conventional military action."

By all accounts, we're now seeing signs of that new-age approach, although whether its repercussions will be entirely non-lethal remains to be determined.

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